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RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0014
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4232
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 0447
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7656
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 7727
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0237
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0759
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8383
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0382
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 0624
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3994
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 7088
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 7171
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 5854
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 3166
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6399
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SUBJECT: ANTI-AMERICAN GROUPS USE SADDAM VERDICT TO SQUEEZE
UPA HARD

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Classified By: Ambassador David Mulford for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The GOI on November 5 issued a tepid response to the verdict and death sentence on Saddam Hussein that questioned the validity of the judicial process. This GOI response reflects the considerable pressure the Congress Party is facing from two key groups that it needs to remain in power, the Left parties and the Muslim community. Both condemned the verdict and the process as a travesty of justice and promised to mount protests. There is almost universal opposition to USG Iraq policy in India, including within the Congress Party. The UPA and Prime Minister Singh are already facing growing criticism for their pro-US stance following the US Congress's delay in passing the US/India Civil Nuclear Agreement. In this heated political climate, Congress has apparently decided that it would be suicide to take a pro-US stance welcoming the verdict. Instead, as with the vote for Venezuela in the UNSC, the GOI hopes its stance will mollify its critics without unduly angering the US. End Summary.

The GOI Distances Itself Yet Again

12. (C) On November 5, key political interest groups were quick to issue reactions to the court's decision to execute Saddam. These included the GOI, the Congress Party, the Left parties and various Muslim groups. In a move clearly designed to put as much distance as possible between the GOI and the USG's Iraq policy without ruffling feathers, the External Affairs Ministry issued a tepid reaction to the sentencing announcement, stating:

"We have seen reports that former President Saddam Hussain of Iraq has been sentenced to death by a tribunal in Iraq. We understand that there is an automatic appeal procedure. Such life and death decisions require credible due process of law, which does not appear to be victor's justice and is acceptable to the people of Iraq as well as the international community. We have always stood for a peaceful resolution of the problems in Iraq. We hope that this verdict will not add to the suffering of the people of Iraq."

Congress Tries to Buck the Issue

13. (C) The Congress Party, like the GOI, did not see any capital to be gained by praising the decision and valued its domestic political standing more highly than any mileage it would get from the USG on this issue. Congress spokesman Abhishek Singhvi noted that his party "does not have much to say, for three simple reasons. Firstly, it is part of a judicial process. Secondly, that process has taken place in another country. And thirdly, the verdict was subject to review and appeal, and hence, not final." However, Singhvi went on to snit that, "since the legal proceedings were only a consequence of the initial United States incursion, a

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question mark regarding its validity will always remain."

While the Left Attacks

14. (C) The Left parties have gained considerable political mileage from their strong criticism of USG Iraq policy, which is generally unpopular in India. They went for maximum benefit and were far less restrained than the GOI. CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat exclaimed that "this is an outrageous decision, a rigged verdict from a trial that was a farce. We want the UPA government to categorically condemn this verdict and use all avenues possible to get it nullified." Karat went on to point out that the trial had little credibility, as it took place under an "occupation government and in a court set up by the occupation regime." He accused the USG of manipulating the decision to "raise the stocks of George W. Bush" on the eve of crucial mid-term elections in the US. Karat announced that the CPI(M) would hold protests throughout India on November 6 to demand that Iraq overturn the death sentence. Note: Those protests were, predictably, a fizzle as usual from a party whose bark is far worse than its bite. End Note.

And Muslims Remain Deeply Divided

15. (C) India's Muslims closely follow the Iraq issue and many have strong feelings about it. However, there is not a consensus as Muslims are deeply divided between Sunnis and Shias (and between conflicting factions within the Shias) when it comes to Iraq. Shias, who have long loathed Saddam Hussain for his atrocities against their community in Iraq, welcomed the decision, while many Sunnis who view US policy on Iraq as part of a general "war against Islam," were outraged. The Shia Muslim Personal Law Board, the most widely representative Shia body, hailed the verdict as a "just punishment." Shias, who predominate in Lucknow, held parties and distributed sweets to welcome the verdict. At least ten of our Lucknow Shia contacts called to convey their appreciation to the United States for its role in deposing and

apprehending Saddam.

¶6. (C) The Sunni dominated Muslim Personal Law Board and Syed Ahmed Bukhari, the Imam of Delhi's Jama Mosque often issue statements on behalf of the Sunni Community. On November 5, they expressed outrage at the verdict, calling for the trial of President Bush for the "killing of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi men, women and children," rather than Saddam. The Urdu press reflected the dominant sentiments of the Sunni majority. The Rashtriya Sahara, one of the country's largest Urdu dailies intoned that George Bush "should be held responsible for the killing of thousands of people in Iraq," and that while "he is the most powerful man in the world, the situation may change at any moment and he may also be standing as a criminal before the court of law." Another Urdu daily, the Hindustan Express, opined that "the

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world will consider this incident as "the end of one tyrant by another tyrant."

Congress Insiders Worry About Nuclear Deal, Too

¶7. (C) The cautious Congress response to the Saddam verdict reflects its growing concerns about US/India relations and their possible impact on the party's political fortunes. Congress party insider and Sonia Gandhi confidante Rajiv Desai (PROTECT) told the DCM recently that the PM was extremely nervous about the process surrounding the passage of the India/US Civil Nuclear deal in the US Senate. The lack of movement in September had greatly emboldened the PM,s critics within the Congress party and without, added Desai, with supporters of the US-India relationship feeling like the chair had been pulled out from under them. Former RAW Chief and current informal PMO Kashmir advisor "Bubbles" Dulat (PROTECT) stressed to D/PolCouns repeatedly at their last meeting that if the nuclear deal does not pass in the lame duck session in November, the PM will be "irreparably harmed." Dulat stressed that the PM had staked so much on the nuclear deal that any lack of progress in November would personally damage the PM,s reputation for integrity, especially because the PM had put so much of his personal prestige on the line in his August address to Parliament. Other privileged contacts have echoed these sentiments, telling us that the PM,s personal standing is at this juncture tied to the nuclear deal,s passage.

As the PM Justifies Partnership with U.S.

¶8. (U) On November 6, just one day after the Left's virulent criticism of his foreign policy approach, the PM issued a muted response indicating that he was not unduly alarmed. Without naming the Left parties, the Prime Minister said he was "disappointed that political leaders refuse to appreciate the changing nature of India's relationship with the world," and often "adopt political postures that are based in the past and are out of line with our current interests as in increasingly globalized and globally integrated economy." Singh remarked that "there was inadequate recognition about the increasing interdependence between India and the world and the consequences thereof for our domestic policies."

Comment - UPA Caught in a Vise

¶9. (C) The UPA remains confident that no party or coalition on the political horizon can displace it and that its coalition is in no danger of falling. That said, the PM's foreign policy has hit an "air pocket" and his supporters have begun to feel that his support within Congress has been dented by his outspoken support for closer India/US ties. The UPA, Congress Party and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

have been facing ever-growing criticism of their pro-US stance on foreign policy and economic issues from within and without the party, with some of the most adamant criticism ironically coming from the Left and Muslim groups, who accuse the UPA of backing a US-led "war on Islam." These critics have long intoned that the UPA "takes dictation" from Washington and has sacrificed Indian independence and integrity for promises that never materialize. These criticisms often fixated on the US/India Civil Nuclear Agreement as a symbol of the PM's pro-US foreign policy.

¶10. (C) Like the vote for Venezuela in the UNSC, the GOI/Congress reaction to the Saddam verdict reflects a calculated decision to distance the UPA government from Washington and appease the more virulent critics on an issue which is not that important to Congress and where there is little room for maneuver. Since criticism of US Iraq policy is almost universal in India, it would be politically difficult for the GOI to welcome the verdict, which would in the eyes of most put the GOI too close to Washington. Congress needs the Left and Muslims to remain in power and cannot afford to alienate them over this issue, especially when most in Congress harbor similar sentiments. In this instance, Congress has apparently decided that it is better to cut its losses and survive to fight another day.

¶11. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)
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